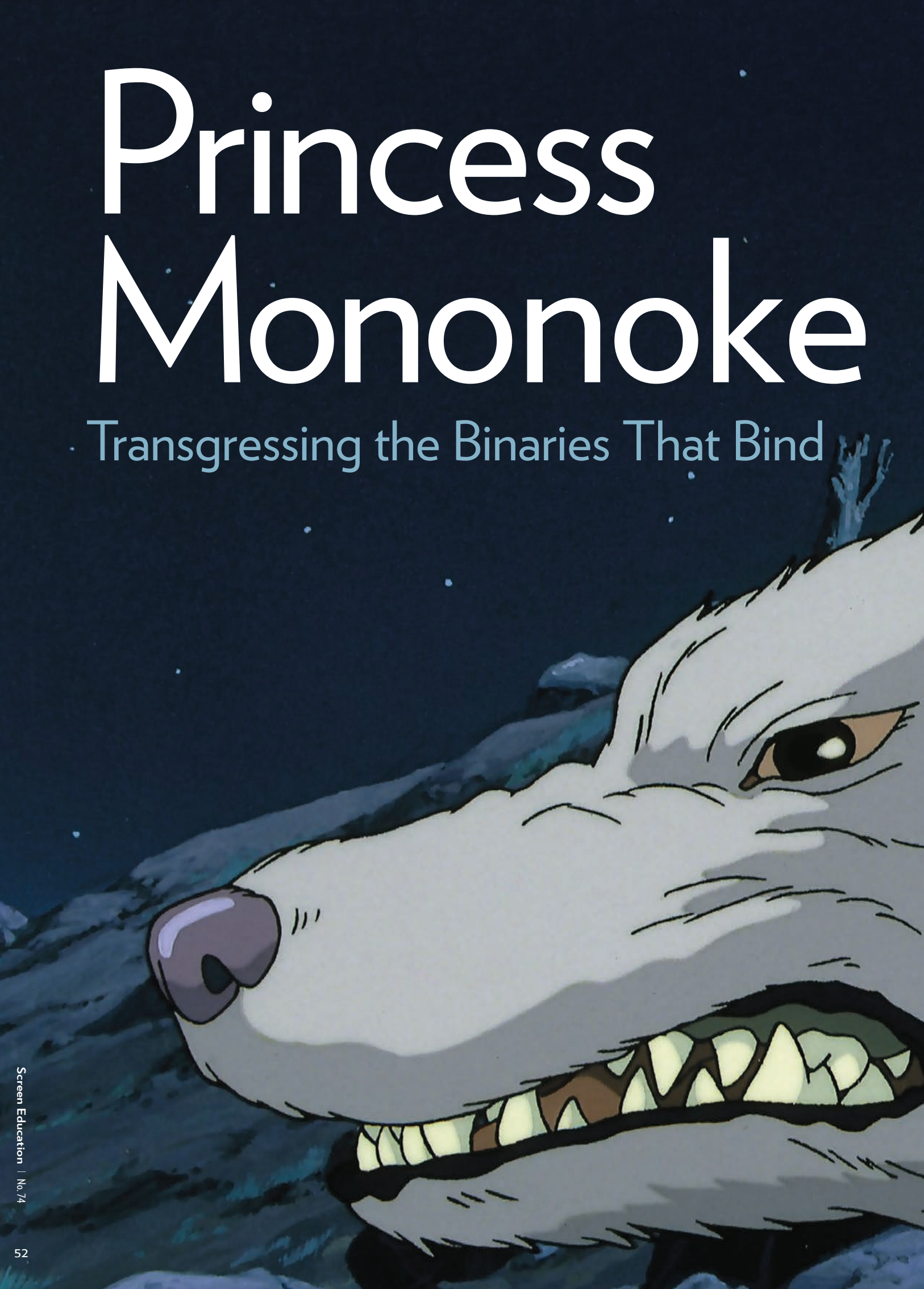
# Princess Mononoke

## Transgressing the Binaries That Bind



For a film with a strong moral voice about the damage that human societies do to the natural world, *Princess Mononoke* contains a surprising level of ambiguity elsewhere. TARA JUDAH explores how Miyazaki's refusal to employ binaries enhances the film's treatment of gender and morality.

*This article refers to the original Japanese-language release.*

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Ever since *Princess Mononoke* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1997) cracked the Western market, Studio Ghibli has been championed as a morally superior alternative to Disney.[1] Adults and adolescents taking joy in children's animation is hardly a new phenomenon, but with Ghibli there's no stigma attached. Instead of being considered a 'guilty pleasure', Ghibli films, and their filmmakers, are lauded for both content and style. Along with the stunning handpainted cell work that Ghibli continues to pour time and money into instead of relying on new digital technologies, the key point of difference is that the content of the films is sophisticated. Freed from the constraints of binaries – such as good/evil and male/female – Ghibli films allow the complexities of life and the imagination to play out in myriad ways. The films are still told through narrative and their themes remain universal, but the edges are softened, the lines gently blurred. While *Princess Mononoke*, along with many of the Ghibli films, disposes of traditional gender roles and defies any such reductive readings, gender politics is still at the centre of the films. Much like the style of Ghibli's animation, however, these issues are drawn in greater detail and never painted with broad brush strokes.

Despite its title, the film is not actually about a princess named Mononoke, nor does it focus on a female protagonist. The character we might be inclined to think of as our 'protagonist' is Ashitaka (Yōji Matsuda), an Emishi prince. Defending his village against a demon – Nago, a boar, possessed by rage – he is physically

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'infected', or cursed, by the transference of the great beast's rage. Leaving his village behind, Ashitaka's pursuit is to heal the imbalance in the natural world that has led to this sickness. Despite the film's quest narrative and search-for-justice set-up, Ashitaka's major role is to introduce us to the other characters in the film: the wolf-girl, San (Yuriko Ishida); her mother, Moro (Akihiro Miwa); the leader of Irontown, Lady Eboshi (Yūko Tanaka); wandering monk and mischief-maker Jiko (Kaoru Kobayashi); boar leader Okkoto (Hisaya Morishige); and the Great Forest Spirit (also known as the Deer God). In this way, Ashitaka can be thought of like a storytelling stone gathering moss; each encounter with another character fleshes out the narrative and drives the plot forward. The final destination, to which all the characters' divergent paths eventually lead, is the lake of the Great Forest Spirit.

It is only here, at the crux of the film, that the title *Princess Mononoke* begins to make sense. It is an elusive title and one Miyazaki leaves open to interpretation. Instead of being assigned to one specific character, the title refers to a character essence. *Mononoke* loosely translates to 'spirit' or 'monster' in English. The film's title, then, might refer to the Deer God – a genderless spirit that is Kirin-like during the day but transforms into a Nightwalker at dusk. The Deer God has no gender but is akin to what we might

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Ashitaka; the Deer God; San with her wolf family; San takes on Eboshi
ALL OTHER IMAGES: Scenes from *Princess Mononoke*

think of – in Western countries, at least – as Mother Earth, and perhaps this has some bearing on the film's gendered translation of 'Princess' Mononoke. The Deer God also has the power to heal, which, we learn as the film unfolds, is at the heart of Miyazaki's moralising. It is this power to heal the rupture between the natural world and human industrial impact on it that Miyazaki is most concerned with. Always searching for balance instead of binaries, Miyazaki's titular 'princess' is a figure that represents the will, the essence and the ability to mediate between the two.

But before we reach the lake, let's return to Ashitaka. Hoping to lift the curse and rid himself of infection, he forges on alone. The first character he encounters is Jiko, who advises him to visit the mythical Deer God. Armed with information that could change his destiny, Ashitaka's determination intensifies. It's not long, though, until his journey is interrupted again, this time by a curious conflict between the people of Irontown, led by Lady Eboshi, and a pack of wolves, led by the goddess Moro. As the battle diffuses, Ashitaka sets eyes on San; immediately taken aback by her animalistic behaviour, but with a gaze fixed as though frozen in time, he wonders about the human girl who is a member of the wolf clan. Acting as the audience's point of entry into this strange forest world, Ashitaka's state of transfixion allows us to come to terms with any confusion that such a cinematically unusual female character might provoke.

In classic storytelling, the wolf represents evil and deceit: the Grimms' 'Little Red Riding Hood', Aesop's 'The Wolf and the Lamb' and Joseph Jacobs' 'Three Little Pigs'. The association comes easily but San, as a human girl living happily among wolves, challenges us to leave culturally ingrained stereotypes behind. Ashitaka, acting as our guide, is captivated by but wary of San, and turns – still a child seeking adult advice – to Lady Eboshi for an explanation. At this point in the narrative it is uncertain whether or not he ought to trust Eboshi, but, lost in a strange world, he listens intently as she calls San the 'Princess Mononoke'. At this stage in the film, though San's character takes on the titular role, its significance is yet to be explained. Though San is far from being the film's protagonist – her role is narratively enabling rather than motivating – she soon becomes the subject of Ashitaka's intrigue and, vicariously, of ours.

The conflict between San and Eboshi boils down to environmental ethics: Eboshi has built a town by clearing the forest and

mining ironsand to produce iron. This act has unsettled the forest gods and angered those who once lived peacefully in their midst. Pitting two female characters against each other is not an unusual narrative device for children's fairytales and popular animation: Snow White (Adriana Caselotti) had the witch (Lucille La Verne in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, William Cottrell et al., 1937), Cinderella (Ilene Woods) had ugly stepsisters (*Cinderella*, Clyde Geronimi et al., 1950), and Miyazaki's second feature saw Nausicaä (Sumi Shimamoto) in conflict with Kushana (Yoshiko Sakakibara in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, 1984). But where Miyazaki's films differ from Disney's is that their antagonists aren't *pure* evil. Though most of the more morally ambiguous characters' qualities are aligned with what we might be tempted to call a position of 'evil', Miyazaki always casts a shadow of doubt over absolutes. Along with Eboshi's industrial actions, she is depicted as shrewd and power-hungry, but the town she has created is also a refuge for social outcasts, taking in the lepers and brothel workers everyone else has turned their backs on. Providing a safe place for those whom society has left behind is surely a 'good' act. Her socialist values, then, are at odds with her environmental ones. Much like humans in the real world, Miyazaki's characters cannot be so easily judged. Still, it might be tempting to read Eboshi as 'evil'. Whether or not she really cares for the people she has taken in is ambiguous. It might be that she exploits their needs for personal gain: she needs human labour; they need society and acceptance. At one point in the narrative she even abandons the women she once seemed proud to lead. Absolving herself of the responsibility – or perhaps the burden – of representing her gender, she coldly declares, 'I've done all I can for the women; they can defend themselves.' On the other hand, this could be read as more of a commentary on the inhuman effects of capitalism than an indictment on her resentment towards a following of dependent women. With Miyazaki, there is always room for interpretation.

Conversely, San, the human girl raised by wolves, bestowed with titular grace,[2] might be considered our 'good' female character. But

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even her actions beg more questions than they answer. Morally disgusted by Eboshi's calculating exploitation of natural resources and outraged by the humans' disregard for the forest, her anger is comprehensible. Instead of exercising careful and considered retaliation, however, her actions often resemble those of a petulant child. Unable to exercise control over her emotional responses, she is just as volatile as Eboshi, and often equally to blame for waging the petty wars between the Wolf clan and the humans from the Ironworks. Ashitaka, an outsider to both parties, tries to calm the

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conflicts but his attempts are viewed with suspicion or dismissed as ignorant outsider interference. Though in one respect he is the most 'innocent' character in the film, his innocence is never presented as an honourable symbol of his masculinity; rather, he is the product of grand idealism and an almost tragic naivety. Thinking that everyone should just compromise and get along, though admirable, lacks any deeper understanding of the issues involved.

Ashitaka and San both stand for truth and fairness, but they are also children who must heed aspects of their elders' advice. Jiko, Moro and Eboshi are constantly guiding Ashitaka through the

narrative and it is their convictions that propel the plot forward. Conversely, both San and Eboshi, for all their failings, represent the very real complexities involved in trying to strike a sustainable and harmonious balance between industrial and natural worlds. With this issue fixed at the very heart of Miyazaki's film, the female characters come to represent more than just their gender. Their conflicting viewpoints, the closest things to binary counterpoints that Miyazaki offers us, are crucial.

From here the clashes between species – wolves, boars and humans – escalates, with Ashitaka's fate deeply entwined in the conflict. Though he tries to diffuse rage and stop the large-scale destruction of the natural world, his efforts are almost always in vain. As the story moves forward it becomes increasingly clear that there will be no simple resolution. Without clear distinctions between good and evil, a simplistic ending cannot occur. Just as this realisation becomes clear, Miyazaki's authorial voice enters the film world. A group of dark silhouetted apes appear for the first and only time. They are not integral to the plot and, as such, they can be seen as another physical manifestation of the essence of the natural world – much like the Deer God and the Kodama. Here, however, they represent the forest's consciousness. Voicing the points of discordance in plain language, they want to eat Ashitaka to restore balance:

*We eat men; we have his strength.*
*We want strength to drive humans away.*
*[...]*
*We plant trees. Humans destroy them.*
*Forest does not come back. We kill humans.*
*[...]*
*Deer God will not fight. We die.*
*Wolf-girl not care. Wolf-girl human.*

For anyone familiar with Miyazaki's oeuvre, these words are unmistakably his; the conflict in this film appears in many other Studio Ghibli films including *Nausicaä and the Valley of the Wind* and *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1986). It also extends to *Pom Poko* (Isao Takahata, 1994), whose concept Miyazaki came up with; all these films present conflict between humans and the natural world. In *Princess Mononoke*, San is the only character that belongs to both worlds and it's her duality that evokes spiritual divinity. The title 'Princess Mononoke' begins to make sense if we think of San as part human, part forest creature: a unique being who understands and embodies both the will and essence of the Deer God. Her half-caste experience of life is itself a product of the conflict: the humans who ravaged the forest threw a young San in Moro's path before they fled, leaving her to an eternal damnation – 'Now she cannot be human. And she cannot be wolf.' Suggestions that she might one day share a life with the human boy are also denied. No matter how she appears physically to others, she identifies herself as a wolf, wronged by humans: 'I hate humans!'

San's simple, angry outburst brings us back to the very beginning of the film and what turned Nago into a demon in the first place: rage fuelled by injustice. Ultimately, it is this rage that brings the boars, the wolves and the humans to the lake of the Deer God for the film's spectacular finale. Fuelled by pain and suffering, the boars have 'returned from the land of the dead', now little more than ghostly figures, the humans cloaked in their carcasses. Exacting their revenge at Eboshi's behest, they lance the head of the Deer God. The Great Forest Spirit inside the Deer God – that is, in Nightwalker form – explodes out over the forest in a beautiful, melancholic display that resembles fireworks. Simultaneously, the strange ghost-like tree spirits, the Kodama, fade from existence. If we think back to the suggestion of the Deer God as 'Princess Mononoke', then the Kodama are the subjects of her kingdom dying out. But, if we think of San as Princess Mononoke, then there is still life. A final piece of wisdom is uttered as this occurs: 'He is life itself, he is telling us to live.' The Deer God is described using the male pronoun, which brings us back to Eboshi's earlier reference

to San as the Princess Mononoke. What San represents now, in becoming a new figure for leadership and hope, is so significant that she finally inherits, from the Great Forest Spirit, her divine title. She has, through her unique ability to mediate between both worlds, taken on a special, spiritual role, including the power to heal the two worlds, as the Deer God did before her. Miyazaki's central moral lesson, then, is to rediscover balance between the natural world and human industrial development.

True to her convictions, San does not leave the forest to take up life with the human boy: 'I like you, but I can't forgive what people have done,' she says. She is not a prize for Ashitaka to win. When the two go their separate ways, the reasons are mutually understood, and it is a satisfactory ending that fits with the film's central thesis. So much mainstream cinema (at least in the West) has prepared audiences for romantic union as dramatic resolution. Though romance does feature thematically in some of Studio Ghibli's films – *Only Yesterday* (Isao Takahata, 1991), *Porco Rosso* (Hayao Miyazaki, 1992) – an emphasis on building friendship and mutual respect is always most prevalent. This is a refreshing perspective for anyone reared on fairytale animations in the West. Even if we consider some of Disney's strongest female characters, such as Jasmine (Linda Larkin in *Aladdin*, Ron Clements & John Musker, 1992) and Mulan (Ming Na-Wen in *Mulan*, Tony Bancroft & Barry Cook, 1998), both defiant in the face of patriarchy, the stories always conclude with some form of romantic union. At the end of *Princess Mononoke*, both San and Ashitaka learn to respect difference and show compassion towards others. Just as San took Ashitaka to the Deer God to rejuvenate him when he was weak, so too did Ashitaka intervene and save San from potential entrapment at the Ironworks. Throughout the film, the two help one another fight towards a common goal, and they even save each other – but at no time does either one become dependent on the other.

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What's most pleasing about the way gender roles play out in *Princess Mononoke* is that they don't dominate the discourse. Representation of gender is definitely important, but Miyazaki is more interested in universal humanist and environmental concerns. Films aimed at audiences still in their formative years have the power to either reinforce or challenge established stereotypes. Whereas Disney has traditionally done the former, Ghibli engages with the latter. In working against the types of characters we are used to seeing in fairytales, in fables and on film, Ghibli offers an alternative view of what gender roles might look like. *Princess Mononoke* is interested in what drives humanity, and tells us that, in Jiko's words, 'wanting all between heaven and hell is the human condition'. Ashitaka may be our protagonist but San becomes our leader, and it is she who questions human desire, who is motivated by more than just romance, and who learns that sustainable compromise must replace outright warfare. Striking a balance is about more than settling binary conflict, and San, a half-caste who defies labels, is the only one who can mediate between species. Such fluidity is what allows her to embody the titular role, guiding us spiritually and bridging two worlds with aplomb. A far cry from the Disney Princess movies, *Princess Mononoke* is the name of both a character (or the essence of a character) and a film that are difficult to pin down – static binary views of gender and the world would be as boorish as the rage-fuelled demon that began the narrative. Thankfully, Miyazaki lets black-and-white fade into grey, resulting in beautifully, poignantly blurred lines.

*This film can be purchased from <www.theeducationshop.com.au>.*

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Endnotes

1. Pauline Kael, one of the most influential critics of the twentieth century, nailed it when she said, 'People are made to feel that this stale pastry [*The Little Mermaid*] is what they should be taking their kids to, that it's art for children.' See Daniel Thomas MacInnes, 'Pauline Kael on *The Little Mermaid*', *Ghibli Blog*, <http://ghiblicon.blogspot.ch/2006/06/pauline-kael-on-little-mermaid.html>, accessed 3 April 2014. Matt Zoller Seitz continued the conversation when Pixar partnered with the Disney corporation: 'In place of the conventional, reductive versions of morality and psychology shown in Pixar's films, Miyazaki gives us something closer to actual experience.' See Zoller Seitz, 'Directors of the Decade: No. 2: Miyazaki & Pixar', *Salon*, <http://www.salon.com/2009/12/30/seitz_miyazaki/>, accessed 03 April 2014. Even though Disney now distributes Studio Ghibli films, it was a long, arduous battle for them to acquire the rights; for years, Miyazaki spurned their offers, saying their films lacked decency. See 'August Issue News Section', *ANIMATIONWorld Magazine*, 1996, <http://www.awn.com/mag/issue1.5/articles/newsmag1.5.html>, accessed 3 April 2014.
2. In Japanese, *san* is an honorific suffix that is used between equals of any age, resembling the English 'Mr', 'Ms', etc.

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